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ABSTRACT

Most studies of dialects in English-language literature have focused on works of the nineteenth century or earlier. However, modern literature can expand the scope of dialectological investigation. In John Salinger's "Catcher in the Rye," use of non-standard dialect forms occurs when the author uses an unusually informal register modelled on a spoken style. However, certain non-standard constructions in the book are highly divergent, some more characteristic of non-native varieties of English and others of middle-aged or elderly working-class speakers in areas other than that of the main character. If Salinger's assumptions about the occurrence of these forms in speech are correct, this suggests new areas of dialect study or the need for new research methodology. In Clive James' "Falling Towards England," the interest is not in what usage may or may not occur, but on how a writer may seriously misperceive and thus misrepresent features of a dialect with which he has only a limited acquaintance. In this case, the misperception appears to result from mediation through the system of the author's own dialect. These instances illustrate the potential for further dialect study using contemporary English literature. (MSE)

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SOME NOTES ON DIALECT IN RECENT ENGLISH LITERATURE

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The use of dialect in English literary work was at one time discussed mainly by literature scholars and for the most part somewhat impressionistically. Of late, however, dialectologists and other linguists have begun to produce work on this topic. The most obvious example is Blake 1981, which provides a three-page bibliography of other secondary material. Of course, much of this work is still apt to appear rather naive and non-rigorous to the linguists, but there are exceptions, such as the account by a professional dialectologist of the use of Yorkshire dialect in the novels of Emily Bronte (Petyt 1980), and also some other pieces of a more general and/or theoretical nature. However, the focus is in almost all cases upon works dating from the nineteenth century and earlier. For instance, only one chapter (pp183-199) of Blake's book deals with the post-1945 period. It is the purpose of this paper to draw attention to the scope for dialectological investigation of the most recent literature. The phenomena discussed below are of the greatest interest, and were come upon by the merest chance in reading - a systematic survey, even of a limited area of the vast corpus available, would surely unearth many unimagined patterns of usage and perception.

There are two distinct ways in which non-standard dialect may be used in English literature. One involves the use, deliberate or otherwise, of non-standard forms by the writer herself, acting in her own persona. The other involves the attributing to characters in the story the use of such forms (in dialogue). I discuss here one case of the latter type and one case which is in some respects intermediate.

Cases of the former type are interesting in face of the overwhelming monopoly enjoyed in respect of prestige by the various (closely similar) varieties of standard English, as far as serious writing is concerned. Any deliberate decision to use non-standard dialect features in this way normally involves a clear-cut perception to the effect that other factors - notably the creation of a specific literary atmosphere - outweigh the factor of prestige in the particular circumstances at hand. This is, of course, unusual; even in works by writers such as

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Sillitoe (Saturday Night And Sunday Morning, etc) the local (Nottingham) non-standardisms are largely confined to dialogue, and where they do appear in the main narrative this is usually because Sillitoe has adopted the viewpoint and persona of his character. The phenomenon is perhaps more common in the work of non-native writers of English, although it is not by any means always clear how far these writers actually intend to produce non-standard forms (see below). More commonly, perhaps, writers are simply unaware that they are using non-standard forms. This is obviously possible in the cases of non-native writers in areas such as South-East Asia where no local endonormative standard exists, and where those who do not wish to use forms which they know to be local must as a result rely on their often imperfect grasp of a remote exonormative standard.

Use of non-standard forms (inadvertent or otherwise) is also possible when writers are attempting to use unusually informal registers, modelled on spoken styles. One excellent example of this kind of style is provided by John Salinger's The Catcher In The Rye (see Blake 1981:196). This work is presented as an informal narrative told by the teenaged "hero" Holden Caulfield, and the language is throughout Salinger's conception of early-1950s American teenage slang. How far the usage is intended to be non-standard as well as colloquial, especially in respect of grammar, remains unclear; but the characters are middle-class urban dwellers, and thus would not be expected to produce extremely divergent dialect features. In the modern English-speaking world, and in the U.S.A. in particular, these are now very largely confined to remote rural areas such as the Appalachians. However, certain non-standard constructions and forms which appear in the book are in fact highly divergent. In some cases these appear more characteristic of non-native varieties of English, and in others of middle-aged or elderly rural working-class speakers in places like the Appalachians, rather than of educated New York teenagers such as the fictional narrator. If Salinger is correct in suggesting that such speakers do in fact use such forms (of this latter type, in particular), it may well be that established perceptions of the social and geographical distribution of some syntactic variants is seriously wrong, and, more specifically, that the degree of divergence from standard usage be to found in recent American speech may be much greater than previous academic studies have allowed for. This might, as a rider, have serious consequences for research methodology; but the inadequacies of older survey and elicitation methods are by now well-rehearsed, and the data themselves would be of even more interest. In fact, relatively little is known about contemporary

middle-class English usage.

The phenomena in question involve relative clauses and, more specifically, relative pronoun selection and morphology. Three obvious cases are as follows (page numbers in 1958 Penguin edition):

- i) ... he started these undertaking parlours all over the country, that you could get members of your family buried for about five bucks apiece. (p 20)
- ii) I know this guy down in Greenwich Village that we can borrow his car for a couple of weeks. (p 137)
- iii) I know this guy that's grandfather's got a ranch in Colorado. (p 172)

Comments:

- i) This usage is characteristic of a number of non-native varieties, notably that of Hong Kong (see Newbrook 1988:38). It perhaps originates, at least in cases such as these, in over-extension of the range of roles which relative that (or, in other examples, which) can play, to include cases where a preposition (here, at, etc) plus a relative pronoun, or relative where, would be required in the standard. On this phenomenon, see Newbrook *fc*.
- ii) This usage is characteristic of recessive rural varieties of English, mainly in England. It arises, apparently, because of a preference for that and other semi-pronominal relatives (often, as) over the wh-relatives, and ensuing difficulties with inflexion, notably in respect of possessives. In this case the problem is solved by encoding the possessive morpheme as a separate item (his) - cf iii) below. In standard English the wh-form whose would be required. This usage is well exemplified for England by the examples cited by Darlington (1887), on South Cheshire (mostly with as rather than that). For more discussion see Newbrook *fc*.
- iii) This usage represents another solution to the same problem as arises in ii). In this case the solution involves attaching the possessive marker 's to that, which is of course impossible in standard English. This usage is found in various locations, but again mainly in rural England (and mainly recessively). The only report of recent use by educated urban speakers which has come to my

attention- is a self-report by Anthea Fraser Gupta (born Tees-side during the post war years); but AFG would admit that she adheres exceptionally closely to local usage for a person of her age and education level. For more on this, see again Newbrook *fc*.

We must note, of course, that Salinger's perception might be seriously wrong in respect of at least some of these phenomena (compare the comments below on Clive James). However, the phenomena are not at all salient, and are certainly not involved in stereotyping of any kind (particularly in an urban American context). If Salinger is indeed misreporting (misremembering?) usage, it is not clear WHY this is happening. If, on the other hand, he is right, and these forms do indeed occur (perhaps frequently in the relevant varieties, this is of very great dialectological significance. Cases such as this are, then, obvious pointers to further research, both on the forms used by writers or attributed by them to their characters, and on the actual situations which are being mirrored in these works.

A completely different kind of phenomenon arises in Clive James' book Falling Towards England (reference is to the 1985 Picador edition). Here, the interest lies not in what usage may or may not occur - there seems to be no mystery here, nor any real need for further research on the dialectological facts - but on how a writer may in fact seriously misperceive and hence misrepresent features of a dialect with which he has only a limited acquaintance. In this case, the misperception seems to result from mediation through the system of the writer's own dialect. James' book is a humorous and no doubt partly fictional auto-biographical account of the author's life in London after his arrival from his native Sydney in the 1960s. At one point (p31), he is listening to two white South Africans conversing. The salient features of their strong South African accent are represented by means of imitated spelling. One exchange is as follows:

- iv) Thet's what's rewning Efrica, litting a keffir talk to them like thet. -
Thet's right. They mist not be allowed to enswer beck.

Note that James has, resonably, used e to represent the very close realisation of /æ/ (even closer than in Australian English), as in thet (three times), Efrica, keffir and beck; ew to represent the typically South African diphthong in rewning (ruining); and - perhaps with some oversimplification but still plausibly - i for both /e/ (also very close) in litting and /ʌ/ in mist

(see Wells 1982:612ff). The problem arises in the case of answer. If answer had /æ/ in South African English, this phoneme would indeed be realised around [ɛ], as in thet, etc - justifying this spelling. However, the word is in fact pronounced in South Africa with /a:/, like the other members of the BATH word set as defined by Wells (1982:133ff; on South Africa see p 615). It is thus realised around [a:] - [ɔ:] in broader South African accents (hence one might expect awnser or some such spelling).

James has made this mistake because answer and a number of other words in the BATH set do indeed display /æ/ in his own native accent, that of Sydney (contrary to the pattern found in some other Australian centres, where /a:/ is usual; see Wells 1982:599). He has, in other words, blended his essentially accurate perception of South African English phonetics with a phonological (incidence) feature of his own accent which South African English does not share. Cases such as this might suggest that it is harder to perceive and/or to analyse higher-level phonological features of accents other than one's own (even in theoretically more straightforward cases such as those of incidence) than purely realisational phenomena. While this would not be surprising, it is interesting that errors of this nature provide such clear-cut evidence of it.

This brief paper has done no more than indicate the interest which can be found in phenomena of this kind. The scope for further research on fronts such as these is obviously immense.

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